

February 1, 2010 - Colleagues See Veteran Congressman as Mentor

Tribune-Democrat

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Colleagues see veteran congressman as mentor

By RANDY GRIFFITH, The
Tribune-Democrat

February 1, 2010

JOHNSTOWN

— Dubbed the King of Pork, Rep. John Murtha has been blasted in so many national media reports and targeted by so many political action groups, many would think it would be hard to find supporters to attend a special fundraiser to mark the beginning of his 37th year in Congress.

But local business leaders and colleagues from both sides of the aisle in Washington were eager to speak up for the man considered to be one of the most influential lawmakers in the Capitol.

“It has not just been Jack’s tenure as the longest serving member of Congress from Pennsylvania that has made him one of the most influential figures in the House,” Rep. Tim Murphy, R-Allegheny County, said in an e-mailed statement.

“Other members have come to value and seek his opinion on issues because of his sincerity, candidness and expertise.”

“I believe the people continue to elect Jack Murtha because his No. 1 priority is to look after the people of the 12th district,” Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Hollidaysburg, said in a telephone

interview.

"Mentor" is how
Murphy and others in Congress described Murtha.

"The first day I got here, he gave me two pieces of advice," Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Allegheny County said in his office on Capitol Hill.

"First he said sit on the house floor and observe how the floor works," Doyle said.

"When you know the parliamentary procedures and rules, you could be more effective when it's your time to speak on the floor and get legislation moving."

The second piece of advice Murtha offered the then-freshman representative was to become an expert in some area of government interest.

"(Murtha) said, 'Learn as much as you can. Be the person people go to,'" Doyle said.

Murtha has exemplified the value of such expertise, Doyle noted.

"Jack has become the guy who knows more about defense than anybody in Congress," Doyle said. "He has distinguished himself as the go-to person whether it's military operations or policy."

"The Jack Murtha corner"

Murtha has long been recognized as a major force behind the scenes in Washington, quietly bringing together opposing camps to get bills moved through the legislature.

The Pennsylvania corner of the House chambers is often the place lawmakers from across the country gather to discuss important legislation, Rep. Joe Sestak, D-Delaware County, said in a telephone interview.

"It's really the Jack Murtha corner," Sestak said. "I watch Republicans and Democrats come back to just chat and hang out. It's because he's a good guy."

Criticism directed at Murtha for directing millions in earmarks to local companies and for speaking against the Bush administration's Iraq war policy has not diminished his influence, Sestak said.

"The war in Iraq was wrong," Sestak said. "He was able to call it like it is. Many hold him in higher regard because of the power of his convictions."

Local business leaders continue to rely on Murtha to carry their message to Washington.

"He has been able through his influence to achieve something in a health care system that benefits the area and the military," said Tom Kurtz, president and chief executive officer of Windber Research Institute.

"There is no doubt he has transformed the economy here," said Mark Pasquerilla, president of Pasquerilla Enterprises.

"That is why our unemployment is below the national average,"

Earmarks for projects with local companies such as JWF Industries in Johnstown are not handouts, company President Bill Polacek said.

"It is not like he's giving us fish," Polacek said. "He is teaching us to fish. He gives us the introductions to defense contractors. We take it from there."

The arrangement actually saves the federal government money, Polacek said.

"We have to be lower cost, higher quality than our competition or we don't get the business," he said. "We have proven ourselves we can get business."

Questions about earmarks

But many earmark beneficiaries go on to be Murtha campaign contributors, raising questions about the lucrative contracts, said Craig Holman, government affairs lobbyist for Public Citizen advocacy group.

"It can be a quid pro quo relationship, or there is the appearance of a quid pro quo relationship with campaign contributions," Holman said.

“That looks bad.”

About one-fourth of Murtha’s campaign contributions come from donors associated with earmarks, Holman said.

Targeting local companies to create jobs or attract votes in specific areas can lead lawmakers to vote against their own conscience, said Barry Kauffman, executive director of Common Cause/Pennsylvania.

Although he pointed out Common Cause does not take positions on candidates, he gave an example of a budget-conscious representative who votes to procure costly military aircraft that the Air Force has rejected because a plant in the representative’s district makes parts for the aircraft.

“We have corrupted that congressman’s voting process,” Kauffman said.

“He voted against his best judgement to bring money to his district.”

Ed Sheehan Jr., president and chief executive officer of Concurrent Technologies Corp. in Richland Township, does not see a connection between Murtha’s earmarks and campaign money. What’s more, Sheehan said, earmarks just provide seed money for projects that must stand on their own.

“If you are just going to sign on and support an earmark project and there is no value, that project has a very short life and will fall away,” Sheehan said.

Murtha has also faced criticism for the number of overseas trips he takes at taxpayers’ expense, but Doyle is quick to point out these are not pleasure cruises.

“Nobody likes to go on trips with him,”â€ˆDoyle said. “You always fly into some desert field in the middle of the night, and he doesn’t want to talk to the generals. He wants to talk to the foot soldiers. He uses what he hears from the field, especially from the enlisted men.”